

Japan's New Emperor and Era

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Introduction

On April 30th, the 85-year-old Japanese Emperor, Akihito, is to abdicate after 30 years on the Chrysanthemum throne, becoming the first to do so in over 200 years. The following day his eldest son, Naruhito, is to become the 126th Emperor of Japan. Japanese imperial successions are [regarded as times of societal transition](#) and therefore an important political moment. Japan will look to mark the occasion with friends and allies, including at an enthronement ceremony in October to which foreign delegations may be invited. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited [President Donald Trump to be the first State Guest](#) after Naruhito's accession in May. Furthermore, Abe, who has promoted a vision of a more assertive and independent Japan, [may seek to use the transition to prompt greater national pride among Japanese citizens](#).

What Is the Significance of Japan's Imperial Throne?

Japan's imperial system is based upon [a continuous lineage claimed to date back to 660 B.C.E.](#) Imperial power has historically fluctuated, but notably strengthened under the Meiji Emperor (reign: 1867-1912) when Japan modernized in an attempt to compete with the West. Akihito's father, Hirohito, the Showa Emperor, reigned 1926-1989—an era marked early by Japanese militarism, the Sino-Japanese War, and World War II. After defeating Japan in 1945, the United States chose not to prosecute Hirohito as a war criminal alongside other Japanese leaders, but rather strip his legal authority and have him renounce his supposed divinity. [Chapter 1, Article 1 of the contemporary Japanese Constitution](#), drafted by the United States, reads, “The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power.” Officially, the Emperor's position is now largely symbolic.

Since becoming Emperor in 1989, Akihito has tried to redefine the role. [According to observers, he has provided a source of unity by being present with ordinary Japanese at difficult times](#), including after the 2011 triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) in and around Fukushima. Internationally, he has made goodwill visits (including to the United States and its territories in 1994, 2005, and 2009) and worked to improve relations with neighboring countries. During his historic trip to Beijing in 1992, Akihito acknowledged and expressed “sadness” that Japan's war occupation during the

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early 20th century had “inflicted great suffering on the people of China.” Although he never visited, he also expressed similar sentiments to South Korea. [These gestures were considered contentious at the time](#), with some Japanese nationalists disapproving and many Koreans and Chinese viewing the words as inadequate. In 2001 he [controversially acknowledged the role of Korean culture on Japan and Korean roots in the imperial family](#). Akihito has [publicly admitted](#) he has spent his time “searching for and contemplating on what is the desirable role of the emperor” in the present age.

Who Is Naruhito?

Born February 23, 1960, Naruhito will be 59 as he takes the throne. Both Naruhito and his wife, Masako, are well educated and have spent time abroad (both did graduate work at Oxford University and Masako also attended Harvard University). Because Japan’s Imperial family is constitutionally barred from politics, little is known about Naruhito’s vision for his role as emperor. [Media commentary suggests that he may try to follow in a path similar to his father](#), citing for instance his frequent trips to areas affected by the 2011 disaster and [statements he gave](#) after his father indicated a desire to abdicate. [Media also raises his work on water management](#), including topical keynote speeches at the U.N. headquarters in New York in 2013 and 2015, as a sign he may promote environmental causes.

Other attention has centered on Masako, who has been [compared to the United Kingdom’s Princess Diana for moving from apparent fortune to tragedy under royal life](#). When she married Naruhito in 1993, Masako was hailed as an elite diplomat who might break the mold of Japan’s traditionally male-centered society. Ten years later she started disappearing from public life and was diagnosed with stress-related “adjustment disorder.” Commentators often attribute the disorder to the restrictive nature of the imperial household and pressure to produce a male heir (Naruhito and Masako have one daughter, Aiko, born in 2001). [Masako’s story has shined light on women’s and mental health issues](#). Additionally, the family’s situation raised the possibility of allowing women to inherit the throne; after Naruhito and his younger brother Fumihito (age 53), there were no next-generation male heirs to the throne until the birth of Fumihito’s son, Hisahito, in 2006. Imperial succession laws remains unchanged and continue to prohibit women from becoming Emperor.

What the Reiwa Era May Mean for U.S.-Japan Relations

Japan’s imperial transition looms in the background of a potential transformative time in Japanese history and [U.S.-Japan relations](#). Japan is confronting challenges—a shrinking and aging population, ballooning public debt, a rising China, and a nuclearized North Korea—that could reshape Japanese domestic and foreign policy over the coming decade, including attitudes toward neighboring countries and the [U.S.-Japan alliance](#). As with previous imperial eras, Naruhito’s reign could become seen as a symbol of these changes, and many observers are closely watching whether and how the Abe government appears to use the new emperor’s accession as a chance to further its own political agenda. For example, the Abe Cabinet’s choice of the name for Naruhito’s reign, *Reiwa*, has generated controversy. The government has translated *Reiwa*, which will appear on Japanese calendars and official documents, as “[beautiful harmony](#).” Some analysts have argued that [the name functions as dog whistle signaling support for one of Abe’s main constituencies](#), the Japanese far right. To some, *Reiwa* evokes the pre-war *Showa* imperialist period (under Hirohito), idolized by those constituents. *Reiwa* was derived from an ancient Japanese poem, breaking a tradition of sourcing from ancient Chinese literature. Abe has voiced the importance of era names, stating they are “[integrated into the hearts and minds of the Japanese and support the Japanese people’s inner sense of unity](#).”

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